

Temecula Valley Historical Society

Newsletter

May 2005 Vol 5 Issue 5

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A Cattle Drive Disaster

By Gene Knott

Editor's note: We chose to leave the rancher nameless to spare embarrassment to his offspring.

Louie Roripaugh grew up in the Temecula Valley when the Vail Ranch cattle operation was in its prime. He became foreman of the ranch when he was still in his teens. He worked for the Vails until the ranch was sold in 1964, then leased part of the ranch from the land development known as Rancho California and continued raising cattle for another ten years.

One day while I sat in the old Vail Ranch workshop, Louie told me about working for a local cattle rancher. He was about sixteen or seventeen years old back in the late 1920s when he hired on to work as a cowhand on a cattle drive for a local rancher. They drove a small herd of about 300 head from Yuma, Arizona to Temecula. It shouldn't have been too difficult, considering the longer Vail Ranch drives with herds numbering into the thousands.

The trip to Yuma was pretty much routine, but Louie was a little concerned about the herd of horses they took. The horses were a little old and kind of poor. Usually a cowboy had a change of at least four good mounts per day for a drive across the desert.

(the story is continued inside)

President's Corner

If you have driven south on the 215 lately where it intersects with the 15 you may have noticed some green graffiti on the Temecula Valley Historical Society sign on the right side of the freeway. Hopefully by now it has been repaired. It makes one wonder what kind of people we have living in the Valley who would mark up a sign, damaging private property. It was probably someone who flunked history in school.

I didn't see many people from the Society at the Temecula Valley Museum's presentation of the Rancho California era of our Valley on Thursday, April 7. After buying the Vail Ranch, the conglomerate marketed the area for development for many years before selling out to Bedford Properties in the mid-80s. According to Jeff Minkler, the general manager for the properties, the City of Temecula has developed pretty much along the lines envisioned by the early developers. Watch the newspapers for announcements of future presentations by the Museum, which are held on the first Thursday of the month. Next month, on May 5th at 6 PM, Vince and Audrey Cilurzo will discuss the beginnings of their winery in Temecula. It should be a wonderful presentation.

Don't forget our Heritage Luncheon that will be held on May 11th at the Embassy Suites at 11 AM. **Jimmy Moore**

The Vail Ranches

By Eve Craig

In late 1964, it was announced that the vast Vail Ranches in Riverside County had been sold to San Francisco Savings Union for something over \$20 million in cash. It included four old Mexican Land Grant Ranchos, the Temecula, Little Temecula, and Pauba as well as Santa Rosa, mesa land West of Murrieta. These adjoining properties totaled over 87,500 acres of fine, well-watered cattle and grain land, just north of the San Diego-Riverside County line.

Before the visit of the first recorded white man in 1795, this was all populous Indian country. Juan Pablo Grijalva led a party of explorers and soldiers to what is now Warner Hot Springs, seeking a site for an inland mission. Thus, Mission San Luis Rey was founded in 1798. Within a few years its herds of cattle were grazing throughout a wide area. A granary was built at Pala in 1910, and the Asistencia in 1916, and in 1918 a chapel was built at Santa Ysabel. At an uncertain date a chapel and granary were built in Temecula. A thorough archaeological survey of Temecula country in the vicinity of the Highway 395 bridge over the Temecula River was made by the San Bernardino Historical Society. B. E. McCown directed the work.

Before the mission days waned, Temecula, Santa Rosa and Pauba lands grazed great herds of mission cattle whose hides were shipped to Boston on the Yankee trading ships that came around Cape Horn. All this country was under Spanish dominion, until Mexico's Independence in 1822 which was under Mexican governors, until Americans took over in 1846 – 1848. Americans came in great numbers. When Mexico could not hold on longer, the Mexican governors gave land grants generously to their friends; 26,608 acres were granted to Felix Valdez in 1844. It was patented to Luis Vignes in 1852. Santa Rosa's 11,266 acres were granted to Juan Moreno in 1846 by Gov. Pio Pico, the last Governor when California was under Mexican rule, and Pauba's 26,497 acres were granted to Vicente Moraga in 1846 by Pio Pico as well. Little Temecula, of 2,283 acres, was confirmed to Pablo Apis and later purchased by Louis Wolf.

Luis Vignes bought both Temecula and Pauba and in 1853 sold them to a group of San Francisco men for \$25,000. Santa Rosa became the property of the Machado family who also owned La Laguna

where Lake Elsinore is now and the Temecula Rancho. Santa Rosa was also the home of Parker Dear and wife, Helen Coutts, sister of Cave Coutts of Guajome Ranch near Vista.

The Mormon Battalion marched through Temecula Valley from Iowa to San Diego in 1847. Many fortune seekers came from the East. Butterfield stages rumbled through Pauba and Temecula on their way to Los Angeles. And in the 1880s the California Southern Railway announced that they would build from San Bernardino on the route of the old Mormon wagon road – right through Temecula Rancho. Murrieta and Temecula boomed! Hotels and railroad stations were built at both towns. Trains brought both prospective residents and promoters, and town lots were sold everywhere. Unfortunately, the tracks through Temecula Canyon were washed out by floods two times and the trains were re-routed over a new road along the Coast from San Diego north.

An Indian problem developed and the Indians were forced to leave in 1875 due to the U. S. Government's failure to ratify the treaty between the Americans and Indians. Several legal owners wished to graze their sheep and utilize properties they had bought. Peaceful natives who had lived here for centuries were forced to evacuate to the rocky Pechanga Indian Reservation just south of Temecula and similar tragedies were being enacted elsewhere in California. Attracted by the fate of the Indians, Helen Hunt Jackson visited and stayed with Louis and Ramona Wolf at their home a few times. She wrote the book, *Ramona*, and it opened the eyes of thousands to the injustice done to the Indians by the white settlers. The Government may have made the Indians' lives a little easier because of the book. Louis Wolf provided shelter at his store for the Indians who were being driven from the land where they had lived for a long time. Even though Wolf was appointed as part of the posse to evict them.

Walter L. Vail had amassed a huge cattle ranch near Tucson, Arizona. Searching for more grazing for his cattle, in November of 1888 Vail leased Warner's Ranch from Governor John Downey. The Indians of Warner Springs were forced out in 1903 and relocated at Pala. They held a ceremony and cursed owners of Warner's, present and future. Some strange things happened to Walter L. Vail, who came with his cattle from his Empire Ranch near Tucson, Arizona. They cancelled the curse in another ceremonial in 1927.

Walter Vail had purchased the Vail Ranch in 1904 and 1905, comprised of part or all of four Mexican Land Grants mentioned above, amounting to 97,500 acres. He established part of his cattle business in the Temecula Valley. He had a partner, Carroll Gates, and both ran the cattle raising business as very astute businessmen. Gates did not remain long in the partnership. Walter Vail died in 1906. He had five sons and two daughters. The Ranch he established prospered well under the management of his son, Mahlon Vail, Mrs. Mary Vail Wilkinson, and her son "Sandy" Wilkinson and the other heirs and the able foremen. Among the foreman were Jack and Louie Roripaugh. Sandy Wilkinson lived and worked on the ranch primarily as administrator, and still in the 2000s resides on part of the old Ranch.

Mahlon and his father Walter had planned a dam for many years before it happened. There was a natural site where Temecula Creek entered the Pauba Valley, a narrow gorge at the mouth of a canyon. Legal complications delayed construction for about 30 years, but finally in 1948 a reservoir was created which held 50,000 acre-feet of water. It was called Vail Lake. This provided water to grow their own feed as well as other crops. Interestingly, Sandy Wilkinson supervised much of the construction of the pipeline that delivered water to the rest of the ranch.

Mahlon Vail was very attached to the ranch and never wanted to sell it, but in 1964, he reluctantly did for \$20 million. Without Walter Vail and the Vail Family, Temecula would never have grown as it did and become the beautiful area that it is.

Sources: Southern California Rancher 1965, A Thousand Years in Temecula Valley, Temecula at the Crossroads of History

A Cattle Drive Disaster, continued

He was afraid these horses weren't up to quality for a trip like this.

The trip started out as expected, but since the weather had been extremely dry they were concerned about finding water. After about the second day on the drive the cattle became harder to move without water. Every chance they had, the cattle would try to break away to return to familiar country where they could find water. The horses got a good workout trying to keep the cattle moving in the right direction.

On the afternoon of the third day the cattle started to smell water and quickened their pace to the point

the cowboys couldn't hold them back. All they could do was to follow until the cattle stopped running. The herd did stop when they arrived at the All American Canal that brings water from the Colorado River into Imperial Valley.

The canal is an open ditch dug across the dessert to provided farmers with irrigation water. The dirt banks were so saturated that when the first cattle reached its banks and stopped to drink the others trying to get to the water pushed the first ones into the stream. As cattle crowded in, more and more were pushed into the water and got mired in the soggy banks. The cattle were tired and weak from their long drive without water.

When the cowboys finally caught up with the herd, they crossed the canal at a bridge and started roping the steers to pull them from the soggy west bank. They roped and pulled until the horses gave out and saddled fresh horses and went back to rescuing steers. When they ran out of fresh horses, they watched cattle flail in the water and float downstream. They saved a few that went downstream, but lost a total of eighteen to twenty head.

Louie said the rest of the trip was uneventful, but he often wondered what the *zanjaro* (ditch rider) thought when he discovered the carcasses washed up against the trash screen downstream from their crossing.

Upcoming Events

May 5, 6 p.m. - Vince & Audrey Cilurzo speak about early vineyards in Temecula

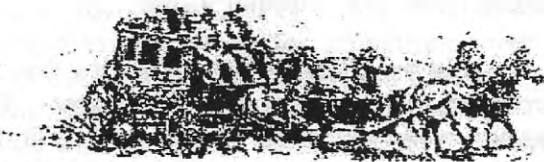
May 11, 11 a.m. - Heritage Luncheon at Embassy Suites Hotel

May 14, 15 - Western Days in Old Town Temecula

June 26 - Vail Centennial event tentatively scheduled at the Historic Vail Ranch site

An ad from The High Country thirty years ago:

Travelers along the Southern Trail a hundred years ago urged their horses along as they neared Temecula because everybody between Saint Louis and San Francisco knew that in old Temecula here would be hardy food and drink and a warm friendly welcome. Motorists today step on the gas a little harder as they near Temecula for the same reason. If you have not already done so, visit Old Town Temecula, stop in at one of the many good eatin' places, say *howdy*, and appease your appetite with food that will stick to your ribs!



Temecula Valley Historical Society
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